



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
Phone 406-542-5500

September 8, 2017

Dear Interested Citizen:

Thank you for your consideration and/or comments on the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' (FWP) proposal and its Draft Environmental Assessment to conduct a forest and grassland management project across a project area approximately 2,917 acres in size on its Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA). The proposed forest management project would focus on removing conifers (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir) that have expanded into a rough fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass grassland (native grassland) and ponderosa pine grassland savannah along the western portion of the BCWMA in Missoula County. The native grassland provides critical winter range for the Blackfoot-Clearwater elk herd that has a current population size of approximately 1,000 animals. Depending on stand type, treatments would complete removal or thinning of conifers, and some prescribed burning.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for choosing the Proposed Action (Alternative B). Upon completion of the public involvement process and by inclusion of this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final.

FWP will request approval of this forest and grassland management project from the Fish & Wildlife Commission at its meeting on October 12, 2017, scheduled to be held in Chinook, MT. This meeting is open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Arnold', is written over a horizontal line.

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor

RA/sr

[This page left intentionally blank]



Decision Notice for
Draft Environmental Assessment, BCWMA Conifer Expansion
and Native Grassland Restoration Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804
406-542-5500

September 2017

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to conduct a forest and grassland management project across a project area approximately 2,917 acres in size on the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA). The proposed forest management project would focus on removing conifers--ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir--that have expanded into a rough fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass grassland (native grassland) and ponderosa pine grassland savannah along the western portion of the BCWMA. The treatments would maintain shade-intolerant rough and Idaho fescue, and bluebunch wheatgrass grasslands that were historically maintained by high-frequency, low-intensity fire.

The native grassland provides critical winter range for the Blackfoot-Clearwater elk herd that has a current population size of approximately 1,000 animals. Treatments would include complete removal of all encroaching ponderosa pine within Stand Type 1 (1,452 acres), thinning of understory ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir in Stand Type 2 (920 acres), thinning of understory saplings to intermediate-sized ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir within Stand Type 3 (545 acres), and removal of all conifers in isolated aspen stands with the exception of larger mature ponderosa pine. Treatments would also include approximately 500-1000 acres of prescribed burning, where appropriate to reduce recruitment of seedling-sized conifers and to reintroduce important ecological disturbance processes to the fescue grasslands and isolated aspen stands.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

Alternative A: No Action

If FWP decides not to proceed with the proposed action, the project area on the BCWMA would not be treated. FWP expects that valuable wildlife habitat, including critical ungulate winter-range would continue to deteriorate due to expanding conifers into the rough-fescue grassland and the risk of insects and disease along with uncharacteristically high-intensity wildfire hazard would continue to increase.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

FWP would conduct forested and grassland habitat improvement treatments on approximately 2,917 acres of the BCWMA (as described in further detail in the Draft EA). Following this action, FWP anticipates that critical ungulate winter-range would be maintained through improved grassland condition and increased abundance. Treatment would reduce conifer expansion into the native grassland, and reduce the risk of high-intensity fire events that have the potential to remove the remnant large overstory trees, damage thin organic soils, slow grass and woody browse recruitment, and pose a significant risk to neighboring landowners.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA Conifer Expansion and Native Grassland Management Project proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

FWP is required by MEPA to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a Draft EA for public review of proposed BCWMA Conifer Expansion and Native Grassland Restoration Project on August 2 and accepted public comment until August 31, 2017 (for a 30-day comment period).

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published once each in the *Independent Record* (Helena, July 28), *Missoulian* (July 28), and *Seeley Swan Pathfinder* (August 3) newspapers.

FWP mailed 19 copies of the Draft EA, and emailed approximately 61 notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from August 2 through August 31, 2017.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 8 emailed comments regarding the proposed BCWMA conifer and grassland project (Appendix). One comment was from the Big Sky Upland Bird Association (BSUBA), and 7 were from individuals. Three comments came from Missoula (including BSUBA), 1 each from Seeley Lake and Hamilton, and 3 from unknown locale. All commenters supported the project. Two offered comments regarding sharp-tailed grouse (see Response to Public Comment). No one was in opposition to the proposal.

Comments in support included:

- "I support this project!"
- "Your proposal is solid, and the benefits well worth the effort."
- "Best of luck with this good work!"

- “Good project, makes sense . . .”
- “We are supportive of MDFWP’s proposal . . . , because of the high potential for the project to increase the preferred habitat (conifer-free grasslands) for Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*).”

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

The following comments and FWP responses encompass specific suggestions or comments received during the public comment period. (The “Commenter #” is the Commenter # in the Appendix, sometimes with paragraph number/s also included.)

Sharp-tailed Grouse:

Commenter 2 (para 3): *“I found no mention of how your proposed actions will benefit future Sharp-tailed grouse populations. These birds have been extirpated from previously occupied regions in Montana west of the Continental Divide, including the Blackfoot Valley. A lack of quality nesting habitat and winter habitat, combined with inbreeding issues may be the most likely reasons for the disappearance of the bird. Sharp-tailed grouse are extremely sensitive to conifer encroachment and will avoid these areas. Because sharp-tailed grouse are considered an ‘umbrella species,’ managers understand that what is good for the sharp-tailed grouse is good for many other species of wildlife, and restoration efforts will enhance the biophysical and ecologic integrity of the valley’s rivers, streams, grasslands, and wetlands.”*

Commenter 5 (para 3, 4): *“BSUBA has been engaged for several years with MDFWP staff in efforts to plan for, and ultimately implement, restoration of Sharp-tailed Grouse to western Montana’s valleys. The upper Blackfoot Valley was the last known location supporting a breeding population in western Montana until 2000, and the BCWMA was historically occupied by Sharp-tailed Grouse . . .”*

“The Blackfoot Valley near Helmsville and Ovando could become a primary reintroduction area, and expanded grasslands at the BCWMA only seven miles to the west would also support reestablishment of this highly mobile grouse species to historic range.”

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments and support of the proposed project. Sharp-tailed grouse restoration is a very relevant consideration for the proposed project and we agree is deserving of consideration as a potential benefit from the proposed work. However, Sharp-tailed grouse were not mentioned because of a general lack of site-specific information. The “Restoration Plan for Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Western Montana” (January 2017) mainly focuses on the Upper Blackfoot and modeling efforts within that document (pp 35 & 37, figures 11 & 12) overlap the eastern most portion of the BCWMA, outside of the proposed project area. Therefore, despite the potential benefit, to the best of our knowledge, we did not have any information to reference directly related to the proposed project area.

Commenter 2 (para 4): *“Please consider dove-tailing your efforts with the work of others in the Blackfoot Valley who are working to restore Sharp-tailed grouse populations. The ‘Restoration Plan for Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Western Montana’ (January 2017) is an excellent reference for this work. This document was developed by MTFWP and the University of Montana.”*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment and suggestion to coordinate our effort with other on-going Sharp-tailed Grouse restoration efforts. Please see previous response.

Proposed Treatments:

Commenter 3: “. . . hope that you can reintroduce fire to this landscape along with the mechanical treatments.”

Commenter 5 (para 2). “We encourage extensive cutting and controlled burn treatment of both Type 1 and 2 conifer tree stands to maximize tree removal and lengthen the interval between subsequent tree control treatments.”

FWP Response: Thank you for these comments. FWP agrees that fire is an underutilized tool for managing conifer encroachment and for restoring grasslands. We are working to develop resources and expertise to introduce fire to this fire-adapted ecosystem following proposed mechanical treatments.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

FWP has reviewed the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and has determined that this action will not have significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.


DECISION

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have measurable negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

The proposal is consistent with statute that requires FWP to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement on forested lands it owns. This project reduces excessive fuel that can potentially increase fire severity and future pine beetle infestation, while enhancing wildlife habitat.

CONCLUSION

By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA and the Decision Notice are hereby made the final EA. The finding of selection for the Proposed Action (Alternative B) is the product of this Decision Notice. I am pleased to recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approve this project.



Randy Arnold
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

9/8/17

Date

APPENDIX

All comments on the proposed BCWMA Conifer Expansion and Native Grassland Restoration Project proposal (and its Draft EA), received by FWP during the comment period of August 2 through August 31, 2017. (Comments received via E = email.)

Com- men- ter #	Via	Para- graph	Comment
1	E		I support this project!
2	E	1	I am writing to comment on the BCWMA Conifer Expansion & Native Grassland Restoration -- Draft EA.
		2	Your proposal is solid, and the benefits well worth the effort.
		3	However, I found no mention of how your proposed actions will benefits future Sharp-tailed grouse populations. These birds have been extirpated from previously occupied regions in Montana west of the Continental Divide, including the Blackfoot Valley. A lack of quality nesting habitat and winter habitat, combined with inbreeding issues may be the most likely reasons for the disappearance of the bird. Sharp-tailed grouse are extremely sensitive to conifer encroachment and will avoid these areas. Because sharp-tailed grouse are considered an "umbrella species," managers understand that what is good for the sharp-tailed grouse is good for many other species of wildlife, and restoration efforts will enhance the biophysical and ecologic integrity of the valley's rivers, streams, grasslands, and wetlands.
		4	Please consider dove-tailing your efforts with the work of others in the Blackfoot Valley who are working to restore Sharp-tailed grouse populations. The "Restoration Plan for Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Western Montana (January 2017) is an excellent reference for this work. This document was developed by MTFWP and the University of Montana. In addition, the Big Sky Upland Bird Association has been very active with sharp-tailed grouse recovery in the Blackfoot Valley. Thanks for considering my comments.
3	E		Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I support this project and hope that you can reintroduce fire to this landscape along with the mechanical treatments. Best of luck with this good work!
4	E		Good project, makes sense, go for it.
5	E	0	See attached comments to the Environmental Assessment supporting conifer control and grassland restoration on the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area.
		1	The Big Sky Upland Bird Association (BSUBA) has been organized for over 30 years as a non-profit organization in Montana dedicated to habitat conservation and hunting opportunity for all upland game bird species in the state.
		2	We are supportive of MDFWP's proposal and Environmental Assessment Alternative B to control conifer expansion and native grassland restoration across nearly 3,000 acres of the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA), because of the high potential for the project to increase the preferred habitat (conifer-free grasslands) for Sharp-tailed Grouse (<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>). We encourage extensive cutting and controlled burn treatment of both Type 1 and 2 conifer tree stands to maximize tree removal and lengthen the interval between subsequent tree control treatments.
		3	BSUBA has been engaged for several years with MDFWP staff in efforts to plan for, and ultimately implement, restoration of Sharp-tailed Grouse to western Montana's valleys. The upper Blackfoot Valley was the last known location supporting a breeding population in western Montana until 2000, and the BCWMA was historically occupied by Sharp-tailed Grouse (Ossowski <i>in</i> Deeble 1996).
		4	A new plan to reestablish Sharp-tailed Grouse in western Montana has identified evergreen tree encroachment into grasslands as the principle ecological barrier to grouse reestablishment (McNew et al. 2017). The Blackfoot Valley near Helmville and Ovando could become a primary reintroduction area, and expanded grasslands at the BCWMA only seven miles to the west would also support reestablishment of this highly mobile grouse species to historic range.

5		References:
6		Deeble, B. D. 1996. Conservation of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, with special emphasis on the upper Blackfoot Valley, Montana. University of Montana, Missoula, MT. 70 pp.
7		McNew, L. A. 2017. Restoration plan for sharp-tailed grouse recovery in western Montana, May 2017. Montana State University, Bozeman MT. 99 pp.
6	E	Really, really, really good. [Referring to comments in #5]
7	E	Very good. Thanks. [Referring to comments in #5]
8	E	Good job. [Referring to comments in #5]